

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 682

CS 011 420

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TITLE Influences of Gender and Adolescent Pleasure Book Reading on Young Adult Media Use.
PUB DATE Aug 93
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (76th, Kansas City, MO, August 11-14, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Higher Education; *Mass Media Use; Media Research; *Reading Habits; Reading Research; *Recreational Reading; Secondary Education; *Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS Memphis State University TN; Southern Illinois University; Student Surveys

ABSTRACT

A study examined gender differences in media use with emphasis on reading for pleasure as adolescents. Subjects, 191 freshmen and sophomores enrolled in survey courses in mass media at Memphis State University and Southern Illinois University, completed surveys designed to investigate how young adults established their pattern of mass media use in the context of other leisure-time activities. Results indicated that more young females than young males read books for the pleasure, and that this difference is associated with an array of social and media use habits through a person's teenage years. However, these gender differences in media use seem to dissipate by the time young adults reach college. (Five tables of data are included; 19 references are attached.) (RS)

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Presented to the Commission on the Status of Women research paper competition,
AEJMC Conference, Kansas City, August 1993.

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Adolescents' interest in reading, and how that interest influences young people's media use, concerns both education and mass communication researchers. This study examines gender differences in media use with emphasis on reading for pleasure as adolescents.

Females are found to read books for pleasure more than do young males, and this difference is associated with an array of social and media use habits through a person's teenage years. However, these gender differences in media use seem to dissipate by the time young adults reach college.

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Implications of Gender on Reading for Pleasure

The study of reading, either as a teaching proficiency or a lifestyle proclivity, is a worthwhile research topic.

Educators are convinced that reading ability is the chief predictor of academic success, particularly in the elementary school years (Dwyer, 1973). In fact, a case can be made that insufficient reading skills limit a student's academic progress sufficiently to determine that person's future. Those whose reading ability is inadequate will experience failure in other academic subjects, develop low self-esteem, find themselves unable to complete high school, and be incapable of securing satisfactory employment and career development (Hunter, 1986). From an educator's standpoint, reading ability is a prerequisite for educational success.

Mass communication researchers add a further dimension of value to the investigation of reading. More than fifty years of studies have shown that media audiences can be divided into two groups: those individuals who attend to the print media and those who attend to the non-print or broadcast media. Differences between the two groups are great because print media — books, magazines and newspapers — are depicted as information media while broadcast media are primarily entertainment (Schramm et al., 1961).

People with inadequate reading skills do not attend to the print media, exacerbating the problems educators associate with illiteracy. Being unable to read at a sufficient skill level relegates a person to a life of detachment from current events and the issues that control society (Rincker et al., 1990). Such a person has failed in a formal educational

setting and is destined to remain isolated from any possible pattern of lifelong learning (Guthrie et al., 1991).

Viewed from either the educator's or mass communicator's perspective, few research topics could be more important than the study of reading. Given the significance of the subject, a theme in the reading research literature that bears continued inquiry is the alleged difference in reading proclivity attributable to gender (May, Ollila, 1981). Specifically, do females engage more in reading for enjoyment than do males?

The research on the topic suggests that females do spend more time reading books than do males, especially during adolescence. This study attempts to add evidence to that finding and to take the reading penchant issue beyond a gender difference at adolescence. Using a sample of college students, the investigation examines gender differences in book reading for pleasure at ages 8-12, gender differences in print media use during a person's teens and again in early adulthood. Reading and print media use is further investigated in terms of non-print media use and social activities.

The study's purpose is to identify activities associated with or differentiated from an interest in reading, based on a person's gender. From these patterns of media use and activity, the investigators expect to establish a life cycle paradigm for young men and women that other researchers may use effectively to learn more about gender and its influence on reading habits.

Literature Review

Gender differences in learning to read and reading ability. The literature documents gender differences in learning to read and reading ability (e.g., Halpern 1986). An early study by Samuels (1943) found that first-grade girls attained higher scores on reading achievement tests than boys.

Later, in a study of individual differences in cognitive development and school achievement, Stevenson et al. (1976) found that girls scored significantly higher than boys on reading and reading-related tasks from the pre-kindergarten level through third grade.

Saracho (1984), however, found that while girls did better than boys on school reading tests at the first grade, boys were the higher achievers at the third grade level.

Chall (1983) states that there are both biological influences and socio-cultural influences on gender differences in learning to read. According to her findings, girls are ahead of boys in learning to read in the early years. Day and Day (1991) found that gender was a significant predictor of scores on several measures of metalinguistic awareness.

Few studies have explored how children's understanding of reading may be affected by a child's gender. Beach (1991) found in a multivariate analysis of variance that there were gender differences in development of concepts about print, but subsequent univariate analyses of variance failed to reach significance.

An interesting finding by Beach and Robinson (1992) was the pattern of gender differences on the concepts about print tasks. These researchers found that, for children in grade levels from pre-school through third grade, girls scored only slightly higher than boys on the tasks at the pre-school level, but that girls' scores increased through first grade until there was almost one standard deviation difference between the girls and boys. The difference narrowed somewhat at second grade, and then became nonexistent at third grade.

Several researchers try to explain the differences between boys and girls in forming their attitudes toward print. Block (1983) posits that boys in

this society are given more opportunities for discovering and exploring the world while girls grow up in a more structured and controlled environment. She suggests that reading as a structured and controlled activity is thereby more compatible with girls' upbringing.

Dwyer (1973) asserts that the demands of schooling (reading and writing) are not compatible with the cultural expectations for the male sex role, thus interfering with the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

In sum, previous research seems to show that when they are children, girls tend to be better readers and score higher on reading-related tasks than boys, especially in the early school years (before third grade). Researchers have tried to explain this finding from a social and cultural perspective that reading books is compatible with the cultural expectations for the female sex role. Thus, the accumulated evidence suggests that when they are young, girls possess greater reading skill levels than do boys and may be expected to read more for pleasure.

Reading as a leisure pursuit of teens. Little research has been done on adolescents' leisure pursuit of reading. Investigations of youth reading tend to focus on predicting who will be readers and on relating reading to intelligence, parental influence, or socio-economic status (e.g., Neuman, 1986). Only a limited number of studies acknowledge that reading is a leisure activity of young people (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Medrich et al., 1982; Walter, 1927).

Walter's 1927 study found that both males and females, while not pursuing reading as a major activity, nevertheless consistently pursued some degree of reading for fun. Girls, much more so than boys, pursued leisure reading of books. Medrich et al. (1982) examined the leisure

pursuits of fifth- and sixth-graders and found that youth approaching the teenage years show marked disinterest in leisure reading.

In contrast, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) ranked reading as the fourth most popular leisure pursuit for both female and male adolescents, although these researchers do not explore adolescent reading further.

In a recent study, Moffitt and Wartella (1991) found that sports was both the female and male preferred activity for high school students. For females, reading was the third most popular leisure activity, after sports and being with friends. For males, reading, talking on the phone, and watching television all ranked fourth after sports, being with friends and music (tied), and solitary activities.

Moffitt and Wartella's data on high school students reveal not only a significant number of readers over non-readers but also an upward trend in reading from freshman to the senior year in high school (76% of freshmen to 86% of senior leisure readers). These data suggest that high school students do pursue reading as leisure activity, and a relatively large percentage of adolescents claim to read for fun, although the authors cautioned that for many readers it can serve as only a minor pursuit.

Moffitt and Wartella also point out that no contemporary research into adolescent leisure or reading has noted gender differences in reading pursuits.

Then, from the limited studies on teenage reading as a leisure pursuit, two patterns seem to emerge. First, teenagers do pursue reading as a leisure activity, but this pursuit is relatively minor compared with other activities such as playing sports. Second, males and females do rank leisure reading of books differently, with girls slightly more likely than boys to report reading as a leisure pursuit.

These findings are tentative because so little research has focused on gender and youth cohorts' heading habits. However, the implications are far reaching because formation of a reading habit could be a lifelong pursuit. Those individuals who are readers when they are children may be more likely to retain the habit through their teenage and early adult years, and even beyond.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review presented, the following hypotheses were developed for testing:

H1) Females report significantly greater levels of book reading for pleasure than do males at ages 8 through 12.

H2) Females report significantly greater print media use than do males at ages 13 through 17.

H3) Young adults who report greater levels of book reading for pleasure in their early reading years (ages 8 through 12) will report significantly greater print media use in their teens (13 through 17), regardless of gender.

H4) Young adults who report greater levels of book reading for pleasure in their early reading years will report significantly less involvement in social activities as teens: less mall attendance and less involvement in sports.

H5) Females will report significantly greater non-academic print media use during their college years than will males.

Should these hypotheses be supported by the data, the pattern established will lead to this picture of print media use through a young person's exposure with reading material:

Girls are more likely to engage in pleasure reading than are boys, and this trait continues to shape women's use of the print media throughout their early adulthood.

Both boys and girls who were positively influenced by early pleasure reading are more likely to shun social activities as teens.

Pleasure reading by boys has no significant effect on their use of print media as young adults.

Data from this study also provide an opportunity to extend the observations about gender and early book reading into a person's media use habits during young adulthood. Lack of previous findings in this area suggests a research question rather than an hypothesis:

Do the patterns of print media use found in adolescence and the teenage years extend into a person's early 20s?

Methodology

The study is a secondary analysis of a survey instrument designed to investigate how young adults established their pattern of mass media use in the context of other leisure-time activities. Findings from the original study (Howe and Stone, 1992) revealed the importance of reading books for enjoyment at ages 8 to 12, and the variables included in the questionnaire offered an opportunity to trace the influence of early pleasure reading on later social activities and media use.

Data collection for the original study was done in a freshman-sophomore level introduction to mass media course at Memphis State University. A total of 94 subjects in the course completed the questionnaire in a classroom setting in March 1991.

A second administration of the same questionnaire was performed in February and March of 1993 at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale to cross validate and extend the sample base. A total of 97 subjects in two sophomore-level survey courses completed the questionnaire for a final, combined sample of 191 students.

Sample matching. T-tests and contingency tests were performed to determine the similarity of the two samples. Statistically significant differences were found in gender and in race. The first group had been 68 percent female, while the second was 42 percent female. Combined, the two groups offered a balance in gender.

Where the first group had been 79 percent Caucasian and 20 percent African-American, the second was 63 percent Caucasian and 16 percent "other" (due to a large international enrollment on the second campus site).

Other demographics, such as parent's educational attainment, ACT composite score, college major, and age were similar for the two groups.

Although not statistically significant, the second group averaged greater newspaper and magazine reading as teenagers, and more days per week reading newspapers currently. The two groups were similar on nineteen other dependent variables relevant to the present investigation.

In all, the sample matching comparison suggests that the two groups may be merged, and findings reported for the combined sample of young adults in selected introductory classes on two college campuses. Because the present study investigates an individual's recalled and present behavior, no generalizability to a broader sample of college students or young adults can be assumed. However, as in all behavioral investigations, the presumption is that a significant outcome in these data would be found in other, similar samples of individuals (Babbie, 1979).

Variables. Variables pertinent to the present study included:

1) Reading books for pleasure as an adolescent measured by a seldom-to-very-frequently answer to this questionnaire item: "When you were young, say ages 8-12, how often did you read books for pleasure?"

2) Teenage media use and social activity was measured by the item: "When you were a teenager, say ages 13-17, and had free time after school or on weekends, how often did you engage in each of the following types of activities: go to the mall; watch TV; talk on the phone; play sports; listen to records, tapes or the radio; read a newspaper or magazine; read books other than for schoolwork? Each activity was rated from 1 to 5, with "5" being very frequently.

3) Current newspaper use was measured by: "When you aren't in school, about how many days per week do you usually read a newspaper?"

4) Another current frequency of print media use measure was:

It's the spring break . . . [Y]ou have no homework and your boss at work said you deserve a week's paid vacation. You now have 100 hours of free time to devote to media use. How many of those 100 hours will you spend on each of the following: going to the movies; watching television, both cable and non-cable; viewing video tapes; listening to records or audio tapes; listening to the radio; talking on the telephone; reading the newspaper; reading magazines; reading books for pleasure; writing letters?

Most subjects were able to allot hours so they totaled 100. However, to equate for the few mistakes in addition, hours each subject gave to each activity was converted to percentages.

5) The final relevant variable was gender.

Findings

The first hypothesis, that females report greater levels of book reading for pleasure than do males at ages 8 through 12, is supported (see

Table 1). A difference by gender was found in the reported levels of book reading for pleasure in the adolescent years, with females reporting significantly greater reading.

No gender differences were found (see Table 1) in reported use of newspapers and magazines during the teen years of 13 through 17, however, females did report significantly greater book reading as a teenager. Although a statistically significant difference between the sexes results when these print media use measures are combined (newspapers, magazines and books), the second hypothesis is supported only in terms of females spending more time reading books in their teen years.

The third hypothesis predicts a correlation between an individual's early book reading for enjoyment and print media use as a teenager. Table 2 provides results that support the hypothesis for the entire group and by gender. Although tests of correlation do not imply causality, in this case it is obvious that adolescent book reading is at least an antecedent of teenage print media use.

Table 3 provides the findings for the fourth hypothesis: Young adults who report greater levels of book reading for pleasure in their early reading years will report significantly less involvement in social activities as teens (less mall attendance and less involvement in sports). The hypothesis is supported with strong negative correlations between adolescent book reading and mall attendance and sports.

Table 3 offers additional insights about early book reading for pleasure and the several teenage media use and social activities variables in the study:

- 1) Early book reading is positively and significantly associated with both measures of print media use as a teen, reiterating the third

hypothesis' finding, but is especially associated with teenage book reading, reiterating the second hypothesis' finding.

2) All measures of print media use are significantly and positively associated with one another. This finding indicates that teenage use of newspapers and magazines is associated with teenage use of reading books.

3) Early book reading for pleasure is negatively related to all measures of teen social activity, indicating that reading for pleasure as an adolescent is related to lessened social activity as a teenager.

4) Teenage social activities are generally negatively related to teenage print media use and generally positively related to one another. This finding suggests that in the teen years, an interest in reading is fundamentally different from an interest in social activities.

5) Three of the teen social activities are statistically and positively associated with each other. These include: going to the mall and talking on the phone, going to the mall and listening to the radio, and talking on phone and listening to the radio. However, playing sports is not associated with the other social activities.

In all, the findings on teen activities suggest two distinct types of behaviors: those who read versus those who go to the mall, talk on the phone and listen to the radio. Teens who play sports are likely not to be readers, and they are less likely to be mall attendees, frequent television viewers or telephone users.

The final hypothesis, that females will report greater non-academic print media use during their college years than will males, is not supported.

Table 4 provides an overview of the relationships between adolescent book reading for pleasure and the measures of media use for all students during their early college years. Included are hours per weekday viewing

of television and days per week a daily newspaper is read. The remaining measures are the results of the 100 hours of leisure time for media use.

The figures in Table 4 show that early book reading for pleasure is associated with college-age magazine and book reading, but not with newspaper reading. The two measures of television use are correlated as are the two measures of newspaper use, but neither daily TV time nor newspaper days-per-week is correlated with other media use measures.

Hours spent at movies is correlated with video hours, but with no other measures. Videos also are associated with records/audio use, but with no other media use. Use of records/audio is the most highly correlated variable, being associated with six other measures including both print and non-print media. Similarly, radio is correlated with four print and non-print variables. Phone use is associated with newspaper use.

The traditional print media — newspapers, books and magazines — are correlated with one another. Time spent with letter writing is negatively correlated with television viewing.

This overview confirms many accepted beliefs about how the media are used together and provides a sense of the relationships among print and non-print use, at least for this sample of young adults.

Table 5 includes the gender variable and the outcome of hypothesis five using the same measures of media use. There are only two statistically significant differences in media use by gender with males being more interested in television and females being more interested in books. In all, the analysis suggests that by the early college years, media use habits are generally the same for both sexes.

Women's preference for books may be a lingering proclivity from their adolescent years, a carry-over from their earlier experiences with

reading books for pleasure, but that by early adulthood, the gender differences in media use no longer exist.

Implications

The findings suggest that a very distinct gender difference exists in an adolescent's formative reading years, defined here as ages 8 to 12, with females far more likely than males to engage in reading for pleasure. The present study makes no attempt to trace the cause of this distinction — whether it is based on cultural expectations, related to early reading abilities or the availability of engaging gender-based books for adolescents — but to add to the existing evidence that a gender difference in adolescent pleasure reading does exist.

Book reading interests established by females early in life continue into their teen years. It isn't so much that the young women read more than do teenage males (no gender differences exist in newspaper and magazine reading), but they continue their greater interest in reading books. Actually, for both sexes, a predilection for reading books for pleasure early in life is associated with the same penchant through young adulthood.

Fondness for reading books for pleasure is associated with a tendency to engage less frequently in social activities as a teen. In concert with the findings that suggest two types of teenagers — a bookworm and a socialite — the data support the view that teenage girls are more likely than teenage boys to be in the former category.

But the gender patterns for pleasure book reading as an adolescent and as a teen seem to disappear as young adults reach their 20s, at least for this sample of college students. At this point in their lives, young adult

women and men report equal levels of print media use, indicating that earlier gender effects on pleasure reading are no longer in force.

Recommendations

Not knowing the cause of differences in adolescent book reading behavior — whether reading skills, cultural expectations or other variables are at play — prevents knowing why women's early proclivities are stronger.

But the evidence that early devotion to pleasure reading lingers through a person's formative years accentuates the need to determine why women are more ardent book readers. Continued research to identify the cause is certainly worthwhile.

For instance, if the explanation is boys' inferior reading ability at this age, educators might recognize this gender problem and institute procedures to correct the deficiency. If the reason is lack of engaging reading material for young males, this deficit might also be corrected. If, however, the cause is cultural expectations, rectifying the situation will be more difficult unless changes in the social order reduce gender behavior biases.

Regardless of the cause, this study's findings present additional evidence that book reading for pleasure is a powerful influence that lingers into early adulthood, and it is one that women possess more than do men.

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Table 1: Mean adolescent book reading for pleasure, teenage print media use by gender (t-tests)

	<i>Males (n=84)</i>	<i>Females (n=104)</i>	<i>p</i>
Book reading for pleasure, ages 8-12	2.20	2.91	.001
Frequency of news- paper/magazine reading as a teenager	3.12	3.02	n.s.
Frequency of book reading as a teenager	2.33	2.99	.01

Table 2: Correlation with adolescent book reading and print media use as a teenager (Pearson Correlations)

	<i>Teen Print Media Use</i>	
	Newspaper- Magazines	Books
Adolescent book reading for pleasure:		
entire sample	.279	.688
males	.367	.630
females	.271	.693
Newspaper-magazine reading as a teenager:		
entire sample		.399
males		.439
females		.410

all correlations are significant at $\leq .01$

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between adolescent book reading for pleasure and teenage activities

	<i>Adolescent Book Reading</i>	<i>Mall</i>	<i>TV</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>Sports</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Newspapers/ Magazines</i>
Mall	-.22*						
TV	-.14	.19					
Phone	-.06	.32**	.17				
Sports	-.31**	.06	-.20	-.05			
Radio	-.07	.23*	.16	.27**	-.02		
NP/Mag	.21*	.10	.04	.02	.07	.11	
Reading	.70**	-.30**	-.07	-.25I	-.25*	-.26*	.25*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 4: Correlations between adolescent book reading and young adult media use

	<i>Adolescent Book Reading</i>	<i>TV Time</i>	<i>News- paper Days</i>	<i>Movie Hours</i>	<i>TV Hours</i>	<i>Video Hours</i>	<i>Record /Audio Hours</i>	<i>Radio Hours</i>	<i>Phone Hours</i>	<i>News- paper Hours</i>	<i>Magazine Hours</i>	<i>Book Hours</i>
TV Time	.10											
Newspaper Days	.03	-.02										
Movie Hours	.12	.14	-.02									
TV Hours	-.06	.25	.05	-.05								
Video Hours	.10	-.01	-.04	.19	-.04							
Record/Audio Hours	-.04	-.09	--	-.08	-.05	.18						
Radio Hours	-.03	-.12	--	-.11	-.08	.07	.56					
Phone Hours	--	--	-.13	.04	-.06	-.10	.40	.35				
Newspaper Hours	.12	-.12	.32	--	-.01	-.09	.29	.31	.23			
Magazine Hours	.15	.08	.06	.07	-.03	.02	.19	.11	.12	.41		
Book Hours	.35	-.10	-.02	-.05	-.14	--	.30	.29	.12	.36	.34	
Letter Hours	.12	-.07	-.04	.09	-.21	-.09	-.07	-.06	.11	.06	.06	.12

If coefficient $\geq .15$, $p < .05$; if coefficient $\geq .20$, $p < .01$

Table 5: Young adults' mean television time, days reading newspaper and expected use of 100 leisure-time hours by gender (t-tests)

	<i>Males (n=840)</i>	<i>Females (n=100)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Weekday hours watch television	3.3	3.5	1.53	n.s.
Days per week read newspaper	4.4	3.9	.86	n.s.
Movie hours	7.8	6.8	.89	n.s.
Television hours	23.5	18.0	2.67	.01
Video hours	9.4	9.3	.11	n.s.
Records-audio hours	14.8	11.6	1.63	n.s.
Radio hours	10.9	13.4	1.36	n.s.
Telephone hours	8.2	10.3	1.31	n.s.
Newspaper hours	6.1	5.5	.75	n.s.
Magazine hours	5.3	5.6	.36	n.s.
Book reading hours	6.0	10.3	2.47	.01
Letter writing hours	2.4	3.7	1.87	n.s.